

John Diggs-Dorsey (born 1856-1860, died 1880)

According to the 1880 census, which was taken in June, a 23-year-old black man named John Dorsey was living on or next to property owned by James Tschiffely (age 36) and his wife Mary (age 44), off Seneca Road between the towns of Darnestown and Seneca. John Dorsey's relationship to the head of house was listed as "servant," and his occupation as "laborer," meaning he was probably a farm hand employed by the Tschiffelys.¹ According to James Tschiffely, John Diggs-Dorsey had been in his employ for five months, had said he was from the Damascus area of Montgomery County, and that he had been formerly enslaved by "Mr. King," of King's distillery. It is possible this explanation was a story Diggs-Dorsey told to his potential employer, in order to sound more like a local worker (a better prospect to hire), as opposed to an itinerant/migrant worker (a stranger) from Washington, D.C. Several papers

suggested he was from Washington, perhaps part of a group of workers coming up into the County from there,² and, if this is accurate, the existence of the letter from a possible father living in Washington (later described) also supports this version of his place of origin. Alternately, some sources said he was from Port Tobacco, Maryland, or that his mother lived at Port Tobacco in Charles County.³ John Diggs-Dorsey's young age, as well as both the inconsistency and commonality of his name(s) make it difficult to verify his origins.



View of the main intersection at Darnestown, c. 1910. (Photo credit: *Montgomery History*)

James Tschiffely and Mary Malinda Lysle (who went by Linnie) had been married in the Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. in 1873.⁴ Linnie was originally from Pennsylvania, but had been living in Kentucky with her parents, William and Caroline Lysle, and two sisters until her father died in 1871. A few months after their wedding, a deed was executed in Linnie's name for land in Montgomery County, not far from James's father's land.⁵ James was the son of Frederick A. Tschiffely, a wealthy government clerk from Washington, who had purchased land in Montgomery County before the Civil War.

On the afternoon of Saturday, July 24, 1880, James Tschiffely left town to conduct business in Beltsville, leaving his wife alone in the house with John Diggs-Dorsey on site to look after the grounds and livestock. According to an account given by Mrs. Tschiffely to a reporter from Baltimore,⁶ she had visitors in and out all day, and in the afternoon, she sent Diggs-Dorsey into

was a request for money.¹⁷ A married sister of Diggs-Dorsey's lived near "the insane asylum" as it was referred to by the reporter, at that time the Government Home for the Insane (now called St. Elizabeths Hospital) in Congress Heights.¹⁸

Since they thought John Diggs-Dorsey might have been headed toward Washington, Sheriff John H. Kelchner and/or Frederick A. Tschiffely, Sr. traveled there to notify the authorities, speaking with Detectives McDevitt and Acton at the police station, and showing them the letter.¹⁹ At approximately 1:00 am on Monday morning (July 26), the Williams family homes in D.C. were raided by police; they did not find Diggs-Dorsey, but John Williams and John Diggs-Dorsey's

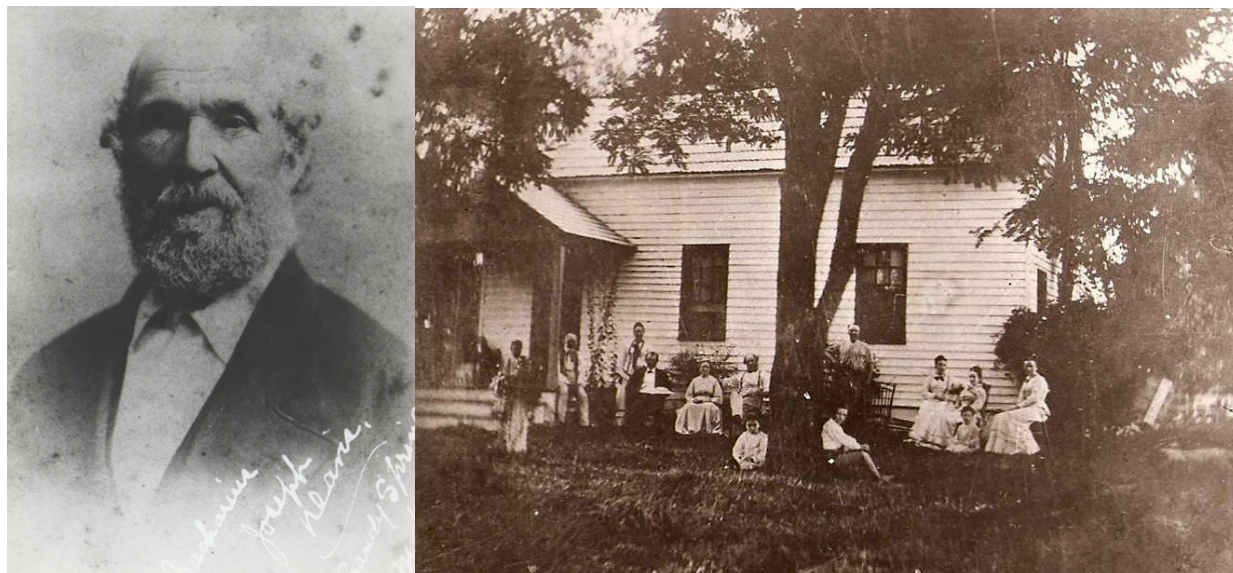
unnamed sister were questioned. Williams said he hadn't heard from his son John in a while and knew only that he was working on a farm and seemed to be doing well. The sister gave a description of her brother ("a very black, round-headed man, between twenty and twenty-three years old, about five feet high, stammered when he talked and blinked his eyes"), but provided no further information on his possible whereabouts.²⁰



Gaithersburg's train depot, as it appeared just after the turn of the century. (Photo credit: City of Gaithersburg)

The manhunt continued on Monday, July 26, in both Maryland and Washington, with rumors of sightings and elaborate capture stories traveling the gossip mill,²¹ along with John's physical description: "Look out for and arrest John Dorsey, a very black man, five feet high, between eighteen and twenty years old, dressed in dark coat and pants, slouch hat and white shirt."²² In the late afternoon on Monday, Zachariah Joseph Davis was driving back from Germantown via Mechanicsville (Olney) to his home in Sandy Spring, with his two young granddaughters in a horse-drawn wagon.²³ A few miles outside Mechanicsville around 5:00 or 6:00 pm, he overtook a man fitting the description of the suspect, walking along the road heading in the same direction. Davis called out to him and asked where he was going. According to Davis, the man stated he was looking for work, as he had been dismissed on Saturday morning and paid off.²⁴ Davis offered Diggs-Dorsey both a ride to Mechanicsville and help finding work, which he accepted. Once there, Davis drove up outside a store and said, "Hold the lines, John; I want to get something here." He went inside and "came out with a coil of rope, with a noose in one end, and with the help of two or three men who came out of the store with me, I got the noose over his neck and we tied him fast."²⁵ According to this same source, Davis states that keeping his prisoner with him, he drove on to his own house in Sandy Spring to have supper, and gave supper to the still-bound Diggs-Dorsey as well. Davis said, "I then told Diggs that we would have to take him to Rockville, and he replied: 'Yes, I'll go there and I'll kill anybody who says I did any harm to Mrs. Tschiffely.'" Davis then enlisted the help of his son, Edward Davis, and the two drove their prisoner back to Rockville; it was 11:00 pm when they arrived at the door of the jail.²⁶

Diggs-Dorsey was turned over to the custody of Sheriff Kelchner, who (realizing a lynch attempt was imminent) quickly assembled a posse of armed local men to secure the building.²⁷



At left, Zachariah Davis, pictured here similar to the age he would have been in 1880 (Photo credit: Essie Davis). At right, Davis's house in Sandy Spring, where he allegedly gave supper to his captive, John Diggs-Dorsey (Photo credit: Montgomery History).

An alternate capture story, reported by one or two Washington sources, stated two young boys spotted Diggs-Dorsey and told several local vigilantes on horseback.²⁸ The *Sentinel* reported many people waiting at the train station for hours, expecting the prisoner to arrive from Silver Spring, Beltsville, Washington, or other places.²⁹ Rumor, conjecture, and false information spread on Monday by word of mouth, by telegraph, and in print.

Once news of Diggs-Dorsey's capture spread on the evening of Monday, July 26, a crowd began forming in town and many reporters suspected a lynching was likely to occur that night. One paper even printed, via dispatch, "He will probably be lynched to-day."³⁰ A horseman was sent to Darnestown (approximately a 90-minute trip from Rockville each way, on horseback) to deliver the news to the residents there. The crowd gathering in small groups around Rockville had been instructed to wait until James Tschiffely could arrive from Darnestown before moving to kidnap John Diggs-Dorsey from jail.³¹ Several papers report the Sheriff's assertion that Diggs-Dorsey gave a full confession to him while in jail, explaining he was drunk that night.³² In printing their interpretations of statements allegedly made by John Diggs-Dorsey himself, both while in jail and also while in the clutches of the lynchers, reporters consistently state that he had admitted to committing the "outrage" (i.e., rape) but vehemently denied striking her with a chair or injuring her in any way. Two accounts relate that in his statement to the Sheriff regarding the outrage, he cast aspersions on Linnie Tschiffely (suggesting that in his version of events, the sexual encounter was consensual).³³ At least three reporters interviewed Diggs-Dorsey one-on-one while he was in his jail cell, yet none of them printed direct quotes the way they had in relating the versions of events given by Tschiffely and Davis.³⁴



The Montgomery County Jail was located in Rockville on what is now Maryland Avenue, approximately where the County Council building stands today. Here seen c.1935 just before its demolition. (Photo credit: *Montgomery History*)

By 3:00 am (now Tuesday, July 27), James Tschiffely and other men from Darnestown had arrived, some in masks and with an appointed “captain;” the group of about 30 to 40 men marched in formation up to the jail and demanded entrance, stating that Tschiffely wished to identify the prisoner.³⁵ The Sheriff replied that Tschiffely could come in alone, but the rest had to disperse before he would allow it. This prompted a conference among the group, and they decided to force entry into the jail. Certain individuals were assigned to subdue particular guards.³⁶ One report stated an aggressive pair of bloodhounds normally kept at the jail were enticed away.³⁷ The group rushed the entrance; four men seized Sheriff Kelchner and pulled him away from

the outer door, which was forced open. William O. Kingsbury, the jailer guarding from inside the building, turned over the keys to the jail cell easily once the Sheriff was subdued.³⁸ “I surrender these keys in protest,” said the deputy sheriff [Kingsbury], to which the Sheriff shouted, “Do not give them up at all!”³⁹ Some members of the deputy posse that the Sheriff had assembled were actually in sympathy with the vigilance-committee-turned-lynch-mob, and quickly changed loyalties.⁴⁰ One of the Sheriff’s deputized men—Samuel Matlack—attempted to brandish a revolver in defense of the prisoner, but was quickly disarmed.⁴¹ The Sheriff later stated that if his men had stayed loyal, he could have held the jail against the lynchers,⁴² but among all the armed men enlisted to guard the jail, including the Sheriff himself, only Matlack pulled his gun.

Several reporters, who were camped out since the arrival of the prisoner at Rockville’s jail waiting for the likely outcome,⁴³ followed the group of lynchers and stayed among them the entire time. One reporter from Washington had “improvised a bed in the jail yard and requested to be awakened when the fun begins.”⁴⁴ One *Washington Post* article stated that after the lynching party removed the prisoner from the jail, their “correspondent left with the party.”⁴⁵ The *Daily Gazette* report from Wilmington, Delaware stated: “Your correspondent saw the body about one hour after the hanging...” and proceeded to describe gruesome details. Several reporters directly quoted participants, and referred coyly to the leaders of the group by assigned titles— “the captain,” “the leader,” “the horseman,” etc.—even stating those individuals were deliberately unmasked and therefore unconcerned about revealing their identities.⁴⁶ One reporter described the self-appointed leader as a “sturdy, six-foot, wealthy farmer” who was unmasked.⁴⁷ As for James Tschiffely: most sources report he sent word that the lynchers should wait until his arrival in Rockville, “so he could be present for the ending of Diggs.”⁴⁸ He was the only named person associated with the lynch party, and the participation of at least two of his brothers might also be presumed, as they were active in the manhunt for John Diggs-Dorsey

over the preceding 48 hours, and were likely a portion of “the Tschiffelys” that arrived with the others from Darnestown around 3:00 am.⁴⁹

After subduing the Sheriff and breaking into the jail, the men confronted Diggs-Dorsey in his cell, and Tschiffely confirmed his identity.⁵⁰ They dragged him out of his cell, and forced him, still in shackles, to walk quickly to a place a one-half to three-quarters of a mile down the road towards Darnestown (now called Route 28/Montgomery Avenue in Rockville) to property belonging to Julius West,⁵¹ likely somewhere between current-day Forest Avenue and Laird Street on the north side of the road. The reports were vague about the route taken to the seemingly pre-arranged spot, suggesting the group took their captive via an indirect path on lesser-populated roads before reaching the main road. They were met there, or at a place on the way there, by a man on horseback, pre-arranged. “To those who had been on parties of this kind before, the presence of the horse was easily accounted for,” states the account from the *Post*,⁵² alluding to the practice of dropping a hanging victim from a height. The horseman asked those present to form a circle and swear an oath of secrecy: to not reveal the identities of those present, to protect themselves and their families. One reporter quoted this oath: “I do solemnly swear in the presence of



House at the corner of Forest Avenue and Montgomery Avenue. Built in 1879, this house would have been on the extreme end of the town of Rockville in 1880; the land beyond was known as West’s farm. (Photo credit: Sarah Hedlund)



An 1890 map created by the B&O Railroad Co. to visualize potential suburban development along the Metropolitan Branch line. The arrow indicates the approximate location of the lynching of John Diggs-Dorsey, on land later developed into the West End neighborhood.

Almighty God that I will never reveal the names of those present, or disclose what was done here this day.”⁵³

Once at the site, the men insisted many times that Diggs-Dorsey should “confess” to his crimes, by which they meant him to show regret or remorse for his actions, but he denied the charges repeatedly. “‘I didn’t do it,’ said Diggs, ‘and you will all suffer for this.’”⁵⁴ Another article

quoted him as saying, "You are damned cowards to take a man out and hang him without giving him a lawyer."⁵⁵ In apparently "an unexpected turn in the proceedings,"⁵⁶ the leader of the party suggested they say a prayer for him, and gave him a few moments of reflection, which he reportedly spent in silence, eyes downcast.⁵⁷ Another scuffle ensued, but Diggs-Dorsey was roughly subdued and the noose was fixed around his neck.⁵⁸ He was asked again if he had anything to say, to which he swore loudly and said "What's the use of saying anything? You're going to hang me anyway."⁵⁹ He referred to two letters he had written about the occurrence, but "not much attention was given to this statement."⁶⁰ All accounts describe how they then attempted to seat Diggs-Dorsey on the horse in order to pull it from underneath him, but the animal was too spooked to stand still so that plan was abandoned. Its owner warned it was "a kicker" and someone suggested they let the horse kick their prisoner to death instead. The leader stated, and the men agreed, they were there "to carry out the law," which meant hanging.⁶¹ They threw the rope over the limb of a large black heart cherry tree⁶² and John Diggs-Dorsey was hauled up three feet from the ground and hanged until he was dead. The crowd stayed for perhaps 20 to 30 minutes and then dispersed, leaving the body to be discovered at daybreak.

A large crowd gradually gathered around the still-hanging body of John Diggs-Dorsey on the morning of Tuesday, July 27; most papers report several hundred people were present. Around 9:00 am, local Justices of the Peace Mordecai Morgan and John Kriger were informed that "a man had got tangled up in a rope in a tree."⁶³ They summoned a jury of inquest, consisting of R.A. Sheckells (foreman), Captain James W. Anderson, Nicholas Dorsey Offutt, William A. Veirs, Henry Vielt, James C. Nolan, John Steele, Melchisedec Green, William M. Davis, R.S. Patterson, J.T. Ricketts, John P. Mulfinger, and W.H. Carr. The jury met that morning at the site where the body remained, hearing from several witnesses including Dr. Edward Anderson, who had examined the body and determined the cause of death as strangulation, and Kingsbury, the jailer, who stated he did not know the identity of any of the perpetrators.⁶⁴ No other witnesses were mentioned by name. The jury then rendered the "usual verdict in such cases," that of "death by violence committed by parties unknown," and the jury was discharged.⁶⁵ The rope used



The Montgomery County Alms House, also known as the Poor Farm, taken c. 1910 by Lewis Reed. This is now the location of the Montgomery County Detention Center at the end of Seven Locks Road at Wootton Parkway. Some of the bodies buried there were re-interred at Parklawn Cemetery in the 1960s and 1980s, but many unmarked graves, like that of John Diggs-Dorsey, were turned under and lost. (Photo credit: *Montgomery History*)

to hang John Diggs-Dorsey was cut into pieces and taken as souvenirs, as were several items of his clothing. "One enterprising gentleman secured the slouch hat which Diggs wore."⁶⁶ Undertaker William R. Pumphrey transported the body to the Potter's Field near the Alms House, where it was buried in an unmarked grave.⁶⁷

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Notes

- ¹ William N. Hurley, Jr. (transcribed), *1880 Population Census of Montgomery County, Maryland*, (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 1999), 431
- ² "Terrible Outrage--A Maryland Lady Brutally Assaulted." *The Sun*, July 26, 1880.
- ³ "Terrible Outrage in Maryland." *Evening Star* [Washington, DC], July 26, 1880.
- ⁴ *U.S. Presbyterian Church Records, 1701-1907*, www.ancestry.com (October 15, 2019). [Original source: Presbyterian Historical Society Church Records].
- ⁵ Maryland State Archives, *Montgomery County Land Records: Active Indices, Grantee Index* [Original source: Book EBP10, Page 484-485], www.mdlandrec.net (September 9, 2019).
- ⁶ Several newspapers, including the *Montgomery County Sentinel*, *Wilmington Daily Gazette*, and *Evening Star*, printed quotes from the same interview with Mrs. Tschiffely, given exclusively to a reporter from the *Baltimore Gazette*. An extant issue of the *Gazette* containing the original interview has not yet been found.
- ⁷ "A Fiendish Outrage."
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ "Terrible Outrage in Maryland."
- ¹⁰ "Terrible Outrage--A Maryland Lady Brutally Assaulted."
- ¹¹ "A Fiendish Outrage."
- ¹² "A Tale of Brutality," *National Republican* [Washington, DC], July 26, 1880.
- ¹³ "A Fiendish Outrage."
- ¹⁴ "Terrible Outrage in Maryland."
- ¹⁵ "A Fiendish Outrage."
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ "Terrible Outrage in Maryland."
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ "A Tale of Brutality."
- ²¹ "The Montgomery County Outrage Case," *The Sun*, July 27, 1880.
- ²² "A Tale of Brutality."
- ²³ "A Fiendish Outrage."
- ²⁴ "The Montgomery Outrage," *Evening Star*, July 27, 1880.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ "To Be Lynched At Dawn," *National Republican*, July 27, 1880.
- ²⁹ "A Fiendish Outrage."
- ³⁰ "The negro Diggs...", *Alexandria Gazette* [Alexandria, DC], July 27, 1880.
- ³¹ "To Be Lynched At Dawn."
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ "The Montgomery Outrage;" and *Delaware State Journal* [Wilmington, DE], July 29, 1880.
- ³⁴ Reporters from *The Washington Post*, the *Evening Star*, and *The Sun* all made reference to speaking with Diggs-Dorsey or hearing his side of events.
- ³⁵ "Lynch Law in Maryland," *The Sun*, July 28, 1880.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ "Suspended at Sunrise."
- ³⁸ "The End of Diggs," *Tennessee Public Ledger* [Memphis, TN], July 27, 1880.
- ³⁹ "Suspended at Sunrise."
- ⁴⁰ "Judge Lynch," *Wilmington Daily Gazette*, July 28, 1880.
- ⁴¹ "Diggs Lynched," *National Republican*, July 28, 1880.
- ⁴² "The Montgomery Outrage."
- ⁴³ "To Be Lynched at Dawn."
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ "Caught and Confessed," *The Washington Post*, July 27, 1880.
- ⁴⁶ "A Brutal Negro Lynched," *The New York Times*, July 28, 1880.

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- 47 "Judge Lynch."
48 "The Montgomery County Outrage Case."
49 "Caught and Confessed."
50 "Judge Lynch."
51 *Ibid.*
52 "Suspended at Sunrise."
53 "Judge Lynch."
54 "A Brutal Negro Lynched."
55 "Judge Lynch"
56 "Suspended at Sunrise."
57 "Diggs Lynched."
58 "Shocking Outrage by a Negro Man," *The Democratic Advocate* [Westminster, MD], July 31, 1880.
59 "The Montgomery Outrage."
60 "Suspended at Sunrise."
61 "A Brutal Negro Lynched."
62 "Judge Lynch."
63 "The Montgomery Outrage."
64 "A Fiendish Outrage."
65 "Lynch Law in Maryland."
66 "Diggs Lynched."
67 "Suspended at Sunrise."